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ABSTRACT

The contradictory reception given the epistemic approach to composition pedagogy results from a resistance to simple transmission which is built into the approach, so that the approach is constantly re-invented by its practitioners. According to the epistemic approach, truth is dynamic rather than static, and thus continually being re-invented rather than discovered. Thus, if the epistemic conception is correct, a teacher cannot teach epistemic rhetoric by just handing out statements explaining the position. Instead, the epistemic rhetoric consists of a "resistant" tradition in three ways: it resists identification of itself; it teaches students to resist knowledge as statically conceived; and it even resists the notion of resistance as a method. Resistance takes the form of a two-fold movement: articulations of epistemic philosophy, but framed in ways which resist reification of that philosophy. This two-fold movement is illustrated in the works of Bill Coles and David Bartholomae, who both resist "received," static knowledge. Both have also discouraged other teachers from taking their works as blueprints by sometimes publishing in nonconventional forms. Finally, both write in densely textured styles requiring active readerly participation. The resistance to ready formulation which typifies both of these writers has made their work unusually liable to contradictory interpretations. Thus, compositionists should question the means by which traditions in teaching have been traced or identified. (Forty references are attached.) (HB)

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Re-inventing the Epistemic Approach:

Continuing a Resistant Tradition

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A Talk Given at the Conference on
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This panel explores a recurring problematic in composition studies. In spite of the currency of the term "epistemic," it has been more provocative than directive in its effects on composition pedagogy. Critics have had difficulty even agreeing on what "epistemic" teaching looks like, on who is and who isn't "epistemic." We explore this problematic in three ways. First, I argue that the contradictory reception given the "epistemic" approach results from a resistance to simple transmission which is built into the approach, a resistance which requires that the approach be constantly re-invented by its practitioners. Next, Bill Hendricks extends the analysis of this problematic by exploring how this approach has resisted conventional distinctions between composition teaching and literary study operative even in recent attempts to connect the two. Finally, Susan Wall illustrates one re-invention of the approach in the pedagogy she's developed for a graduate course on composition theory.

James Berlin has offered a useful description of some of the tenets of the epistemic position. According to this position, Berlin says,

> [K]nowledge is not simply a static entity available for retrieval. Truth is dynamic and dialectical. . . . It is a relation that is created, not pre-existent and waiting to be discovered. . . . Communication is always basic . . . because truth is always truth for someone standing in relation to others in a linguistically circumscribed situation. ("Contemporary Composition" 774)[1]

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[1] The text cited identifies this as "New Rhetoric," but Berlin has earlier in the same essay identified New Rhetoric as "what might be called Epistemic Rhetoric" (773). He reproduces the description cited in only slightly

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For Berlin, what primarily distinguishes this position from others is its epistemology: specifically, it posits truth as dynamic rather than static, continually re-invented rather than existing as something to be discovered. Because for this position truth is constructed through dialectic, it is also necessarily social rather than individual—hence Berlin's later designation of it as "social-epistemic." Furthermore, as Berlin points out, because of its "historicist orientation, social-epistemic rhetoric contains within it the means for self-criticism and self-revision" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 490).

What's troubled Berlin's readers is whom he does and doesn't identify with social-epistemic rhetoric. Ken Dowst, who has written on the "epistemic approach," and Bill Coles, whom Dowst identifies as an epistemic teacher, get left out, labeled "expressionists" (Berlin, "Contemporary Composition" 771-73; Dowst 73-74).[2] But Berlin's different lists (constructed at different times) of those whom he would put in the "epistemic" camp include such disparate figures as Kenneth Bruffee, David Bartholomae, Linda Flower, Patricia Bizzell, Andrea Lunsford, Ann Berthoff, James Moffett, and the team of Young, Becker and Pike (see "Contemporary Composition" 773; Rhetoric 187-88; Fulkerson, "Composition Theory" 421-22). One way of accounting for this variety of inclusions is that Berlin ignores other elements that might constitute a particular composition theory or approach. This is the critique which Richard Fulkerson makes (see also Brereton, "Learning Who We Are" 828). Fulkerson notes that Berlin ignores three other "elements" which, according to Fulkerson, distinguish any composition "theory" from others: namely, "axiology"—what we see as the value or purpose for writing; 2) "procedure," or a conception of how writers go about and/or should go about creating texts; and 3) pedagogy ("Composition Theory" 410-11). Fulkerson claims that these elements "are largely independent of each other" (418). However, though these elements may be independent in practice, I'd argue that

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altered form as a description of epistemic rhetoric in his later Rhetoric and Reality (166). See also his yet later description of what he terms "social-epistemic" rhetoric in "Rhetoric and Ideology" (488).

[2] In "Rhetoric and Ideology," Berlin lumps Coles and Kenneth Dowst in a special category of "psychological-epistemic rhetoric that [he is] convinced is a form of expressionism" (488). See also Berlin's Rhetoric 184-85, and Fulkerson, "Composition Theory" 421.

allegiance to one ought to have implications for others—and specifically, in the case of the epistemic approach, I would argue that its conception of knowledge has specific implications for how its practitioners teach both their students and their colleagues. In defining the epistemic approach, then, we need to consider not simply its theory of knowledge but how that theory of knowledge is enacted in discourse.

If one accepts the tenets of epistemic rhetoric, then no statements, including statements about epistemic rhetoric, can exist outside historical moments or particular situations. If knowledge is dynamic, always historically contingent rather than a static entity to be retrieved, then a teacher cannot teach epistemic rhetoric by just handing out statements (like Berlin's) explaining epistemic rhetoric's position on knowledge, for to do so would be to treat knowledge—in this case knowledge about knowledge—precisely as a "static entity available for retrieval" rather than as a relation created in a particular situation "for someone standing in relation to others"—a particular teacher or writer communicating to a particular group—and thus would contradict epistemic rhetoric in the very act of attempting to transmit, or teach, it. The dialectical interaction which is believed to produce knowledge would be stilled, and so no knowledge, at least no knowledge epistemically conceived, would be produced.[3]

If I am right that to avoid contradiction, those adopting the epistemology of epistemic rhetoric must also adopt a pedagogy which "resists" simple transmission, then being an "epistemic" teacher, and teaching how to be an epistemic teacher, are no simple matters. Epistemic teachers, in order to teach "epistemically," must resist the desire to reify knowledge of the epistemic approach when teaching either students or colleagues; they must even resist efforts by these groups to "receive" such knowledge, or any other truth, statically conceived. The "epistemic tradition," at least the tradition I am concerned with, is in fact a "resistant" tradition, and it is resistant in at least three ways: first, it resists identification of itself to the extent that such

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[3] See Daniel Royer's discussion of this contradiction, 292-93. This is not to break all faith with efforts (like Berlin's) to make explicit and to categorize theories of knowledge implicated in approaches to teaching writing; my own practice in this essay enacts a similar effort. But I want to complicate how we use theories of knowledge to identify those approaches.

identification threatens to reify the approach by treating it as existing outside particular situations; second, it teaches its students to resist knowledge statically-conceived; and third, it even resists the notion of resistance as a "method," slogan, or philosophy. To maintain the dynamic character of the knowledge learned, including knowledge of the "epistemic" approach, any statement of that knowledge must continually be challenged, always qualified as provisional in relation to inevitable shifts in historical situation, incessantly "re-invented."

As I conceive it, then, the "epistemic" approach is defined not only by the tenets of epistemology which Berlin describes, but also by the performance of its practitioners as teachers and writers. In understanding the approach, we must look not simply to theoretical statements but also to how those statements of theory themselves function pedagogically: how or whether they enact an epistemic rhetoric. Both the teaching and writing of epistemic practitioners—their epistemic rhetoric—must work against simple identification of tenets those teachers and writers might be said to "hold" or upon which they might be said to have founded their practice. This does not, however, mean that any teacher with an unarticulated philosophy is a likely candidate for the epistemic label. Rather, the "resistance" takes the form of a two-fold movement: articulations of epistemic philosophy, but framed in ways which subvert or resist reification of that philosophy.

To illustrate this two-fold movement, I turn to the works of Bill Coles and David Bartholomae. I admit that neither of these figures seems to be widely recognized in the profession as an exemplary model of the epistemic approach, and yet, by the definition I have offered, both are exemplary. Similarly, though neither figure is typically associated with the other, by my definition, both ought to be. The resistance each of these figures offers to transmission—resistance which accounts for some of the contradictory reception of their work—illustrates the double-movement rhetoric of the epistemic tradition. And as I'll show, the relation of Bartholomae's work to Coles's illustrates the kind of re-invention of the epistemic approach which that tradition requires.

What immediately marks both of these writers as "epistemic" is their view of knowledge as residing only within and in dialectical relationship to language. As Coles puts it in his book

Composing, reality is "composed," "composed by language, or more accurately by languages . . . with which each one of us frames and organizes the world he lives in and by which, for better or for worse, each one of us is framed and organized" (Composing 1) Coles emphasizes the dialectical nature of this movement between knowledge and language when he explains that he wants to lead students to an awareness of the degree to which they themselves are "made by the languages they manipulate—or are manipulated by" ("The Sense of Nonsense" 28). The assignment sequences in his books invite the kind of dialectical process necessary to the creation of knowledge, shifting students from position to position to create ideally what Coles calls a "dramatic dialogue" resulting in "a fresh progression in thought and expression, a gradual building up of a common vocabulary, a more precise definition of terms" (Plural I 13, 12).

Bartholomae similarly describes the problems which students have not as a lack of knowledge or language skills per se but as a writing problem. As he puts it, "A student, to be a student . . . must write his way into the university by speaking through (or approximating) a discourse that is not his own—one that is . . . part of the habitual ways of thinking and writing of the community he would enter, a community with its peculiar gestures of authority, its key terms and figures, its interpretive schemes" ("Writing on the Margins" 69). For Bartholomae, then, knowledge is intimately involved with language, with particular ways of writing. But this does not lead him to recommend that we attempt simply to transmit particular discourse conventions into which students might "translate" knowledge—or be translated. For Bartholomae, literate education involves enabling writers not so much to write within a discourse—learning and reproducing its conventions—but rather "to work within and against the languages of a closed, privileged discourse" (Writing on the Margins" 78, my emphasis). Successful readers and writers, for Bartholomae, are those who "actively seek out the margins and aggressively poise themselves in a hesitant and tenuous relationship to the language and methods of the university" (Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts 41). In the pedagogies which he and Anthony Petrosky have developed, students are engaged in a dialectical "struggle within and against the languages of academic life" (Facts,

Artifacts, Counterfacts 8) in which they "make [their] mark on a book and it makes its mark on [them]" (Ways of Reading 1).

So far I've been pointing to statements Coles and Bartholomae make which are aligned with tenets of epistemic rhetoric. But according to the definition I've offered above, what marks both writers as "epistemic" is not simply the fact that they make such statements but that they also offer resistance to having such statements "received" as static knowledge by either students or colleagues. For when Coles and Bartholomae do offer statements of "epistemic philosophy," in what might appear to be efforts to transmit "epistemic" knowledge, they frequently and regularly qualify those statements by offering critiques of them, disavowing them, framing those statements in forms which work against receiving those statements as "substantive," or employing paradoxical formulations which prevent any simple identification of the knowledge ostensibly to be transmitted.

For example, in one of his essays, Coles introduces what he calls a "Statement" which he ~st says contains knowledge that "one part of me believes all teachers of writing must know, ubscribe to, and work out a set of classroom procedures in terms of." However, Coles immediately follows his "Statement" with a stinging critique of its logic, its oversimplifications of history, and its arrogance, and ends by confessing that in fact his "Statement" amounts to

> really no more than a massive rationalization of the practice of William E. Coles, Jr., himself and as is. . . [that] can in no sense be received as anything like substantive knowledge. Further, it would be no trouble at all for another kind of teacher with a quite different conceptual frame for seeing the activity of writing, to show first how my frame could be pedagogically ruinous, and then how *his* frame, on the basis of what he could prove it made possible, worked better. ("New Presbyters" 6-8)

In addition to offering self-critiques like this, these writers regularly offer disavowals of and discouragement to any attempt to proselytize what they do present. For example, in one of Bartholomae's essays, he warns, "This paper is not meant to be in defense of any particular curriculum" (though he adds that he has one to defend if anyone's interested ["Wanderings" note 5]). Similarly, Bartholomae and Petrosky assert that "[t]he purpose of [the essays in Facts,

Artifacts, Counterfacts] is not to defend or explain a curriculum" (Preface). Coles likewise claims he does not intend The Plural I as a blueprint for others. Rather, he says,

> My intention . . . is to illuminate what is involved in the teaching (and learning) of writing *however* one approaches it, in hopes that this will enable other teachers to take a fresh hold on whatever they choose to do. . . . I have no desire to tell anyone else how he or she ought to go about handling the subject. (1-2)[4]

Coles makes a similar disavowal in the Preface to Teaching Composing, along with an explanation that his disavowal results directly from his philosophical position that writing and the teaching of writing are self-creating activities. For neither students nor teachers, he claims,

> do I intend the approach and discussion to be seen as in any way prescriptive. . . . Thus, although I am concerned in this book with describing a way of introducing students to seeing *writing* as a creative process, . . . I am just as concerned with the *teaching of writing* as an activity to be seen in exactly the same terms.

And he claims in statements to students that his assignments

> are not an argument. They contain no doctrine, either individually or as a sequence. There is no philosophy in them . . . for a teacher to become aware of and give to students, for students to become aware of and give back to a teacher. . . . In fact, the assignments are arranged and phrased precisely to make impossible the discovery in them of anything like a master plan. They are put together in such a way as to mean only and no more than what the various responses they are constructed to evoke can be made to mean . . . for different teachers and students" (Composing 3-4: rpt. Teaching Composing 11-12; see also Composing II 18)

To further discourage teachers from taking their works as blueprints, Coles and Bartholomae, particularly Coles, have sometimes published in nonconventional forms. Coles has issued explicitly fictionalized, novelistic accounts of his courses, and an "essay" on the topic of "Literacy for the Eighties" which consists of a collage of fictional monologues of a writing teacher,

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[4] Similarly, in an essay on "Teaching Teachers of Writing," he claims that teaching teachers of writing should not be a matter of acquainting them with "Compositional Issues or Compositional Theories or even Compositional Techniques" so much as it should be "a matter of offering a subject with the kind of style that will demand the response of another style" (65). Given such claims, we can read as entirely appropriate, even welcome to Coles, William Irmscher's observation that in reading Coles's Plural I, "[what the instructor is like and how the students react] is so vivid that I know I don't want to be like Coles. I don't want to use his approach, and I don't want to treat students as he does. But I know all of this because he has dramatized the situation" (87).

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a recovering alcoholic, and a racetrack "handicapper" (See Plural I, Seeing Through Writing, "Literacy for the Eighties").[5] In both Facts Artifacts, and Counterfacts and Ways of Reading, with its accompanying Resources for Teaching Ways of Reading, Bartholomae and Petrosky present odd cominglings of course materials and theoretical essays on teaching. And they warn against reading those materials or essays as dogma, and even warn against any dogmatism that may have crept into their writing, by situating their comments in their own history, admitting,

> We cannot begin to imagine all the possible ways that the essays [in Ways of Reading] might (or should) be taught. The best we can do is to speak from our own experience in such courses. . . . We don't mean to imply that we have a corner on effective teaching or that there is no other way to help young adults take charge of what they do with texts. (Resources v)

Finally, both Coles and Bartholomae write in styles so densely textured as to provoke and require active readerly participation in response. Coles describes his own writing as advancing "somewhat crabbedly from one notion in them to the next" ("Counterstatement" 208; quoted in Harris 159).[6] Bartholomae describes himself as trying in his writing

> very hard to interfere with the conventional force of writing, with the pressure toward set conclusions, set connections, set turns of phrase. . . . What I learned first as a behavior . . . I've come to think of as a matter of belief or principle (working against the 'natural'—that is, the conventional—flow of words on the page). ("Against the Grain" 24)[7]

But what strikes me most in Bartholomae's writing is his reliance on paradoxical formulations. "Inventing the University," perhaps his most cited work, represents an extended investigation of the paradox of inventing the already established. But his other formulations of writing are also paradoxical, as when he describes writing as "an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity" ("Inventing" 140), or, when, with co-author Petrosky, he describes his Basic Writing course as leading students to practice "imitative originality or . . . captive self-possession" (Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts 40).

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[5] See Joseph Harris's remarks on the "blurring of boundaries" in the Coles's writing, 159-60.
[6] See Harris 159-60.
[7] See also Bartholomae's admiration of such stylistic gestures, "Inventing the University" 159.

The resistance both these writers offer to ready formulation has, paradoxically, made their work unusually liable to contradictory interpretations. Berlin uses Coles's reluctance to offer explicit statements of his position as evidence linking Coles with those Berlin calls the Expressionists, those who locate truth outside language, in personal experience and so advocate "personal" writing ("Contemporary Composition" 771-73; see Courage note 2). The same evidence leads Richard Young to view Coles as among those who hold that "the act of composing is a kind of mysterious growth" not susceptible to exposition (55). James V. Catano finds in Coles's emphasis on self creation an invocation of the cultural myth of the self-made man. And if Coles has been identified as a "new romantic," Bartholomae has been denounced (and sometimes praised) as his extreme opposite, a kind of updated, jargonized version of Ms. Fidditch. As Susan Wall and Nick Coles observe, Bartholomae has been interpreted as advocating an "unambiguously accommodationist . . .pedagogy, a return to a new set of 'basics,' the conventions of academic discourse 'written out, "demystified," and taught in our classrooms" (231). And he is so identified in spite of evidence to the contrary from the course materials he and Petrosky provide in Ways of Reading and Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts. The paradoxical formulations he offers are frequently stripped of their sense of paradox and rendered declarations.[8]

Given the fact that, as Bartholomae observes, "interpretation . . . begins with an act of aggression, a displacement, . . . with a misreading—a recomposition of a text that can never be the text itself speaking" ("Wanderings" 93), and given the ways in which both Coles and Bartholomae frame their statements, both are positioned at best oddly to complain, or to complain very loudly or directly, about such (mis)readings of their work. What interests me is how such readings and other possible readings are distinguished from continuations of their approach. Bartholomae's

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[8] Tom Fox, for example, curiously asserts that Bartholomae somehow turns the "distinctiveness of academic discourse" into a pedagogy which devalues the languages of basic writers and emphasizes the distance of that language from academic discourse (70-71). Richard Courage characterizes Bartholomae's response to the "ambivalence" Shaughnessy expresses about leading students academic discourse as "the rather traditional one of championing the gain of a college education over any loss in individual voice or identity" (257). Both miss Bartholomae's concept of "appropriation" and his rejection of the notion that students and teachers can choose only between students' being true to a prior "home" language or accepting uncritically the "language of the academy." See Bartholomae's critical analysis of the terms of this dilemma ("Writing on the Margins" 71-73; "Released" 84-85; Facts 41).

relation to Coles provides an illustration of what continuing that approach involves. The sequencing of Bartholomae and Petrosky's assignments gives proof of Coles's influence on Bartholomae. But Bartholomae has freely and regularly acknowledged the influence of Coles's work on his own (see "Against the Grain" 25-27; see also his "Teaching Basic Writing" note 1). Although resistance to influencing is part of the tradition I'm tracing, resistance to being influenced is not. Nonetheless, Bartholomae's work represents a re-invention of the approach to such an extent that in spite of his ready acknowledgements of Coles's influence on his own teaching and writing, Bartholomae is not commonly, or even appropriately, associated with Coles as a "Colesian" (See, for example, Richard Courage's distinction between the two, 256-57). Coles cites no one. Bartholomae's texts are littered with quotations. Coles eschews the language of theory and research. Bartholomae positions himself insistently in relation to such language. Coles's work focuses exclusively on an almost de-historicized average freshman student. Bartholomae is known primarily for his work with the history of the marginalized students, those termed "basic writers." Bartholomae has, in short, made whatever he's taken from Coles "his own." In doing so, however, or rather by doing so, he continues a tradition in which both he and Coles participate.

In the past few years attention has turned to the history of teaching composition and to traditions of teaching, as evidenced by such works as Berlin's books on the history of college writing instruction in America, Stephen North's analysis of different modes of knowledge-making in composition, and John Brereton's collection of portraits of individual figures influential in the teaching of composition in the United States (see David Russell, "The Search for Traditions"). By identifying our past, we hope to find an identity for ourselves. But as I have tried to demonstrate, we need to question the usual means by which traditions in the teaching of writing have been either traced or identified—surveying textbooks or statements of philosophy, and treating each as distinct

from the other.[9] In the tradition of teaching writing I have been describing, pedagogies and statements of philosophy need to be read as practices, as "performative," blurring imperceptibly into one another. That tradition thereby resists the usual means of identification, insisting that teachers re-invent the tradition both in their teaching of writing and in their writing about teaching. We will miss this tradition and misunderstand it if we think of "traditions of teaching" in traditional terms. Therefore, if we are to understand this and other traditions of teaching, we need to look not just to statements of philosophy, nor to textbooks, nor to the paraphernalia of course materials, nor even to the interaction of all these in relation to each other, but to the teaching all these enact on both students and teachers, immediately and in history. We need to see how these define, and define differently, what "tradition" means in the teaching of writing.

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[9] Robin Varnum has argued that historical studies of composition need to take into consideration materials not published, including such seemingly ephermal, usually unpublished, material as course assignments, student writings and responses to that writing, course syllabi, and student and teacher journals, and department memos (50).

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